

by LCdr. Tim Wilson

Showing up at your new squadron is always exciting. For me, this was especially true, because it was my first deployment and our Hawkeyes were flying combat missions in support of Operation Allied Force.

My first few weeks at the squadron consisted of trying to assimilate information about air-wing flight operations and the recent mission of E-2 crews (airborne battlefield command and control center). Battlefield management is not a task that the Hawkeye was specifically designed for. To monitor all the necessary radios, it takes the entire crew (including the two pilots) to work together, using eight

radios. For me, most of this training was OJT, which led to a near-midair near Serbia.

We had launched 15 minutes prior to the rest of the strike package and proceeded to our station at our fragged altitude. While on station, the pilot was tasked with transcribing flight reports from the strike aircraft and passing them on to the combined air operations center. The copilot was monitoring the EW threat net, which reports air and emitter activity in the region.

About halfway through our cycle, the radio transmissions increased as the friendlies went in-country. The copilot and I had to temper our lookout doctrine while accurately copying and forwarding the information on the two nets. This task may seem trivial until you realize that the radio calls (made by a Frenchman in broken English) were about SAM activity in the same area where your shipmates were flying. Consequently, our scan shifted to copying and relaying the information to the controllers in back.

On this particular event, I was taking down the five-line, in-flight reports from an A-10 who seemed to have his pipper on half of the targets in the region. The copilot was working the EW picture. I noticed a glint from behind the windscreen brace at the 10 o'clock position, and, as I looked up, I saw a Prowler about 800 feet away, level with us and slowly banking left. I tried to roll into the Prowler as he crossed my nose in a left-to-left pass close enough to fill our entire forward windscreen. I could clearly see the open mouth of the alarmed right-seater. I told the pilot-in-command about what just had occurred. Thirty seconds later, someone called us on the radio. I immediately responded with an unprofessional, "Yeah, I saw you at the last second!" Neither crew was happy that the altitude deconfliction in our air-tasking order hadn't worked, and that we had become so preoccupied that we missed seeing each other until the last second.

Being the new guy, I had found it easy to become overtasked. But was it just a simple case of not looking outside? Do you think this couldn't happen to you because your situational awareness would have been better than mine? Be careful—at the time, both the pilot and copilot were engaged in transcribing and passing critical information. Situational awareness balances on your ability to execute mundane tasks while continuing to respond to the changing environment around you. When 40 hours of flight time in a week and a candy bar for breakfast change your SA, you might just find yourself beak-to-beak, too. 🦅

LCdr. Wilson flew with VAW-124.

BEAK to BEAK

Cockpit photo by PH3 Chris Vickers
Photo-composite illustration by Allan Amen

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